

Man Sought in '99 Slaying Caught

Daniel Perez, wanted in a Fontana killing, is the first fugitive detained in Mexico after the nation agreed to return suspects facing life.

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January 25, 2006

An accused murderer whom local prosecutors have sought for seven years is now in custody after being tracked this week to a coastal resort in Mexico.

Daniel Perez is at the top of Los Angeles County Dist. Atty. Steve Cooley's list of wanted suspects who fled to Mexico and other countries to avoid trial in California. Cooley is now seeking Perez's extradition.

Mexican authorities located Perez, 34, in Mazatlan and detained him Monday. Acting on a tip from a website created by Cooley's office, authorities in both countries first tracked Perez to Cancun, where he was selling timeshares, and then this month to Mazatlan, said John Clark, chief inspector for the U.S. Marshals Service.

The arrest is the first cooperative action since the Mexican Supreme Court ruled in December that the country could hand over to the U.S. fugitives facing life sentences. Before the ruling, prosecutors said, hundreds of people accused of murder in California alone found sanctuary in Mexico because the country refused to extradite suspects facing either life terms or the death penalty.

"This is the first case we will bring to justice, but it will not be the last," said Cooley.

Perez was accused of killing his ex-wife's father while on trial for attempting to kill his ex-wife in 1999. Perez kidnapped 27-year-old Anabella Vara at gunpoint from a South Gate restaurant and shot her in the head.

While out on bail, authorities said, Perez hunted down Vara's father, Carlos, and beat him to death in the father's Fontana home.

Perez then fled to Mexico. California authorities had been searching for him ever since, with little success.

Not long after her father's killing, Vara told The Times in 2004, she received a letter from Perez in which he wrote: "No matter what happens, and I mean no matter what, I got the

last laugh." A few months later, she said, he called to tell her she was next.

Perez was sentenced in absentia to 33 years in state prison for the attempted murder of his ex-wife.

Of Carlos Vara's slaying, Cooley said, "It's a heinous crime, committed in the middle of a trial."

San Bernardino County Dist. Atty. Mike Ramos, whose office will prosecute Perez if he is extradited, said the defendant's communication with his ex-wife probably would be used against him in court.

"We have a good case. We can show his intent," Ramos said.

Ramos credited Cooley's website <http://www.escapingjustice.com> with helping generate new interest in the case.

The website included a multimedia presentation outlining the case against Perez. Cooley said authorities discovered Perez's whereabouts thanks to a tip generated on the website.

Clark said Perez didn't resist arrest Monday morning when Mexican and U.S. authorities confronted him. Perez was again selling timeshares.

Investigators believe he moved from Cancun to Mazatlan after Hurricane Wilma last year. They tracked him down by searching Mazatlan for agencies that sell timeshares. Clark said Perez had a new wife and child.

Officials said it could take awhile for Perez to be returned to California, because this may be the first extradition since the landmark Mexican Supreme Court ruling.

The court's 6-5 vote ends four years of wrangling between the U.S. and Mexican governments over murder suspects who have been protected by Mexico's ban on life sentences.

U.S. lawmakers this fall threatened to cut off millions of dollars in aid to Mexico unless it turned over suspects in a number of high-profile cases.

There will be many more fugitives "tapped on the shoulder down there soon," Clark said.

Since 1978, Mexico has barred the extradition of its citizens accused of crimes that carry the death penalty. The Mexican Supreme Court extended the extradition ban in October 2001 to Mexicans facing life in prison, a penalty the court said violated the country's constitution as a cruel and unusual punishment.

The extradition ban in death penalty cases remains.